

Department of Social and Public Service

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Social Service Series

Bulletin Number 7

# Friendly Visiting

By

Mary E. Richmond

Director of the Charity Organization Department of the  
Russell Sage Foundation



Boston

American Unitarian Association

25 Beacon Street

## SOCIAL SERVICE BULLETIN

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## Friendly Visiting\*

Preparatory to writing this paper, I have corresponded with sixty friendly visitors in twelve different cities. The volunteer work in which they are engaged — that of visiting continuously a few families with whom they have become acquainted on many sides — is only one of many forms of usefulness now open to those who, having other duties, can give only a part of their time to social service. Our educational associations are urging the need of school visitors to make better connection between the school and the home; in several cities the courts are making effective use of volunteer probation officers; the volunteer rent collector is an important part of our better housing programs; with the home savings collector we long have been familiar; we have just had brought before us the plan of volunteer visitors for wayward girls; and probably the largest field of usefulness for the volunteer is in the new tuberculosis classes.

By profession I am one who organizes remedial

\* Reprinted from the Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction.

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and preventative measures for dealing with distress in families, and the friendly visitor is quite generally recognized among my colleagues as a useful means to that end. I desire to forget all this, however, to get away from the cramping professional standards, and to think and write about friendly visiting, if the thing be possible, as a human being.

“He who blows thro’ bronze, may breathe thro’ silver,  
Fitly serenade a slumbrous princess,  
He who writes, may write for once as I do —”

the “slumbrous princess” typifying the unawakened, unregenerate man or woman who has lost touch; who, let us suppose, knows well a good many people with his own sized income or with bigger ones, and is content with this. Some of these comrades he meets at the board meetings of charitable institutions, or of the church vestry, and some in his business, academic, professional or recreational relations. He is inclined to believe that the ability to maintain personal relations with his least fortunate fellow-citizens is “the gift of nature,” and that he was not born with it, forgetting that it’s no such long while ago since the members of his own family held such relations daily, and as matter of course; forgetting, too, that the politician plays his trump card just here and wins, whenever, in a spasm of civic righteousness, we try to put him out of power.

One of the most deplorable results of our changed

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ways of living in cities is that we are finding it more and more easy to hold and express the most approved views about poverty without maintaining any personal relations with poor people whatever. Unconsciously but very rapidly we have been slipping away from a deeply varied social experience, one in which rich and poor, landlord and tenant, employer and workman, tradesman and purchaser, dwelt together "in visible relationship," into a stratified life in which our social relations are sadly impoverished. The trolley-car, the suburban train, the telephone, and the reorganization of the methods of production and distribution, have changed our habits of human intercourse, and what Mr. Wells says of London is equally true in this country: "Our people have overflowed their containing locality; they live in one area, they work in another, and they go to sleep in a third. And the only way in which you can localize them again is expand your areas to their new scale." This was written of the areas of municipal administration, but it applies quite as well to a large neighborliness. Those who ride live in a larger neighborhood than those who travel afoot, and those who ride by rail or by electricity can have larger community interests than those who depend upon horse power, but this is such a recent expansion of opportunity that life has been, for the moment, narrowed thereby. Things — in-

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tervening and ever-multiplying things — are keeping us monstrously busy with the surface. We do not read or crave so much poetry, the publishers tell us; material comforts are choking within us the very springs of sympathy and compassion. The trolley and the train carry us away from the sights and sounds that we associate with distress, and we have not discovered that the lines travel both ways.

Civilization drops every now and then some necessary part of its luggage in this way and has to travel back to pick it up — an awkward process, or one that always seems so to the onlooker. We have had so many houses that we have been forced to rediscover fresh air, and so many cooked dishes that we have had to rediscover milk and eggs. How clumsily we have been doing it many can testify. And now social contact with all sorts and conditions of men — a thing so necessary to our social health and sanity — this lost package also we are rediscovering very clumsily indeed.

The loss to the poor through social stratification has been great, the loss to the country politically has been greater, and the loss to the relatively well-to-do has been greatest of all. It is true that all save the poorest live in a larger world, physically speaking, than formerly, but they live in it in a more provincial spirit, for theirs is the distinguishing mark of the provincial in that they are coming to

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be no longer able "to find interest in any form of life that is not clad in the same coat-tails and flounces as their own."

The most obvious remedy for this predicament of the well-to-do would be to seek opportunities for better acquaintance and greater helpfulness in their natural relations with the poor, but the very crux of their difficulty is that no such relations exist. Let anyone think over the list of his acquaintances — the young couples, professional people, who live in the suburbs; the solid middle-aged people who have a town house and a country house; their son back from the technical school, who has views about civics and views about sports; their daughter who has left college and is beginning to find society a bore, or else who never went to college, but came out early and so ditto, ditto. They have their charities and their clubs and their "interests," but are they not for the most part hopelessly cut off from real contact with their fellows and with the main stream of our national life? The only poor that they know at all are the parasites who seek them out, and the odd jobs people who are still in some instances employed by them directly, and not through a middleman.

I turn from this increasingly large group to the very small group of my correspondents who have contrived, with the aid of certain charity organiza-

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tion societies, to overcome the disadvantages of modern electrical conveniences and get back into genuine relations with people of smaller incomes. "The field is the world," as one of them reminds me, and this is a mere handful of specimen soil, but some things that are true of it are true of soils and harvests everywhere. Violating no confidences, for some of these letters are very personal, let me choose a few of the passages in them that bear upon this one question of contact.

One correspondent writes, getting quite to the heart of the matter:

The greatest barrier in the visitor's path is his own feeling of the difference between himself and the people he wishes to help; as soon as he begins to feel the likeness between himself and them, the way is clear for him to act, and there are endless possibilities for his usefulness.

Another, whose letter recalled an interview many years back in which she had contended with me almost hotly that she could never be a friendly visitor because a poor man's house was his castle, writes as follows:

I have observed that those new visitors who have the greatest possibilities are apt to shrink from intruding on a family with no other excuse than that they mean to improve bad conditions. I would remind them that as a rule they go to a family in some time of great stress, some crisis, and that any one of us is more ready to accept quite simply any offer of friendliness at such a time. We do not resent it as an impertinence that a stranger, seeing our house is on fire,

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should immediately rush in and begin to carry our goods to a place of safety without waiting for a formal introduction.

A visitor who took my queries to a district conference of visitors for reply, writes:

They thought it would be well to tell stories of successful visitors and to remind people who do not know much of our work, that there is absolutely no "pushing in" to families where one is not wanted, but that all new visitors go to a new family with a definite object in mind, and that the introduction is easy.

The three quotations that follow show how differently and yet how vitally fine natures are touched by this particular human experience.

For I think everyone would be glad of the added richness which such contact brings into one's own life. Besides touching so many of the most interesting social questions, it gives one a taste of *real life*, which seems to me deeper and fuller of real pleasure and interest than many of the so-called joys of life, so eagerly sought after—and often missed! Then, I believe nothing else brings a deeper belief in the underlying good in everyone than this close touch with—not "the slums"—but our brothers.

But the visitor who comes in condescension from a "better sphere" is an impertinence. What warrant has anyone even in the name of charity to thrust themselves into the life of a family, to see it as a spectacle, to use its revelations as a zest to their own easier lot, or to make it a matter of small talk! Straight-out giving is infinitely better, to my thinking, than wanton meddling with others' lives. . . .

It has taught me that standards of living are the result of income, rather than the result of inherent differences, of superiority of nature; the contrary is the general attitude of mind on the part of the well-disposed who are "interested in

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charities." It has taught me that cleanliness is a luxury which costs time and money; generally those who need us have neither to spare for this purpose. That to ask those who are condemned by fate and poverty to squalid surroundings and employments that do not permit cleanliness to at once conform to the fastidious notions of those who live outside this world is a foolishness, firstly, because in any range of human life few heads lift themselves above the level; secondly, except in cases where idleness or sin cause the poverty, it does not mean of necessity moral turpitude. One can not go about among the poor learning to know them in their humanity without finding the elemental virtues in full measure.

My own first impression came with the force of a shock. I suddenly felt myself a social factor and felt a proper pride in being fitted to work in harmony with the body politic. Many years of charity work on my own hook had failed to arouse this feeling, and many years of team work, in the school and in the church, have failed to stir this spirit of the hive. . . .

The work has given me more than I have given it. There has been an amazing acquisition of information and a phenomenal growth in ability and fitness. Private study, the school and the college, have never given me the education that friendly visiting, and its accompaniments have brought about in a few months. The work has given me a new kind of self-discipline. In private life I may have my own way, and reap therefore only the harvest of individual failure and broken friendship; in friendly visiting, I may not say everything I think, I may not be self-willed or heady, I may not be disagreeable even for my neighbor's good or my own satisfaction, because I injure more than myself; I hurt the cause in which I am enlisted; I am disloyal. By continued self-restraint I come to see that there is a cause for every shortcoming, and I cannot quarrel with results the causes of which it is my peculiar task to discover.

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The next five extracts are taken in turn from the letters of two mothers, two spinsters, and a widow:

Perhaps it has not occurred to you how great an influence this "friendly visiting" work may have in the home of the visitor. For years we, as a family, have talked and planned concerning the families I have called upon, and besides getting us acquainted with the best methods of helping others, it has a broadening effect upon our own lives. My husband has been instrumental in reclaiming the "drunkard" whom I have spoken of in this letter.

I think one of the great helps of visiting is that it gives one a truer sense of proportion. This is especially true of mothers of young children who are apt to think the world revolves around their own individual child. My family consists of a widow and nine children, and it is very inspiring to me in coping with my four children to see how wonderfully the widow, with every handicap, manages her nine.

The work is peculiarly fruitful to the childless person, for it brings love and the dependence of little ones into her life.

I am as proud of my little girls' progress in school as if they had been my own; while, when my friend moved into a better house where the sun really found them, and bought with the savings an \$18 set of furniture, I felt as if I had come into a fortune myself! Then, when my friend was ill, and all her poor hard-worked neighbors gave of their scant time and means to help her — as many of my friends would not have done for me in like case — I realized more what real sympathy meant and learned another lesson.

What have I gained by the work, and what has it meant to me? you ask. It has broadened my whole life; it has given me work to do when a personal sorrow claimed my thoughts. And it has gained for me, I know, one very loyal friend among the poor.

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There is no reason, of course, why men should not be friendly visitors, though a majority of my correspondents are women. A man wrote the following:

My visiting has, I fear, meant more to me than to those whom I visited. It has meant a change of thought and work most refreshing and invigorating; it has broadened my point of view along industrial, economic, educational, social and religious lines.

And these two must close my citations, though they might be indefinitely extended from the very interesting letter in my possession:

I have done enough visiting, and for years enough, to have reaped the veteran's exceeding great reward. I have seen results. I have watched pauper-born children develop into good citizens.

My chosen families are now in the third generation and look after *me*.

I have said that the effort to recover any one of the lost packages of civilization must seem very awkward to the onlooker, and this recovering of relations with our fellows is no exception. One of the best friendly visitors known to me told recently of a college friend who had seemed unusually kind and capable, but who had had an unfortunate experience in attempting to visit a few poor families soon after she left college. Not only had she had no success, but she had brought away from her failure a new set of prejudices. The visited families

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may have suffered a similar disillusionment, and all of this was due, probably, to the absence of guidance. Starting blindly to follow an overgrown path, she had lost her way, and my informant added that a good start in such work seemed to her the one essential.

What have volunteers a right to demand from the agencies with which they ally themselves as visitors? First, knowledge of the conditions that surround the families visited, and knowledge of the probability of success or failure. Second, interpretation of the visitor's experiences, which should be patiently related to the neighborhood, to the city or town, and to the widest social issues. Charitable societies, however good their intentions, have no right to meddle with the lives of the poor unless they can better them. And in quite as liberal a sense, charities have no right to enlist the services of volunteers unless, in the course of carrying out their own program, they can contrive to make their volunteer workers better men and women. The responsibility is a serious one, and visitors are justified in refusing to associate themselves with charities in which it is not seriously taken.

We hear much about trained paid workers in these days, but the supreme test of a trained worker is the ability to turn to good account the services of the relatively untrained. The better the friendly

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visitor, the higher the standard of professional charitable service that he will demand, and the higher the standard of professional service, the more good friendly visitors there will be. This is not merely a cheering example of reciprocity; it is the larger half of social reform.





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